

Ontario government ignored workers' complaints at poultry plant hit by fatal COVID-19 outbreak

By Roger Jordan
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Ontario's right-wing populist government ignored complaints from workers at the Maple Lodge Farms poultry plant in Brampton in early April, two weeks before a coronavirus outbreak struck the facility. To date, one worker has died and over 25 have been sickened by COVID-19.

Workers told Global News that they had complained to management and the Ontario Ministry of Labour that Maple Lodge Farms, which claims to operate Canada's largest chicken processing plant, was failing to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Social distancing measures were also not being observed in locker rooms and lunch areas. Workers had access to only one or two masks per shift. "I would say it's as close to working at a sweatshop as you can get," one worker told Global News.

The company reportedly recorded its first coronavirus case on April 15, almost two weeks after workers had first complained to the Ontario government about unsafe conditions at the plant.

The Maple Lodge Farms outbreak only became public knowledge on May 4, by which time dozens of infections were confirmed. Throughout April, the low-paid and highly-exploited workers were being bribed to come into the plant with \$40 gift vouchers for KFC and other retailers. This practice is all the more criminal given that a large portion of Maple Lodge Farm's 1,200 workers are recent immigrants whose residency status in Canada is often tied to a single employer.

An Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development spokesperson told Global News, "We can confirm there have been eight complaints from April 2, 2020 to May 8, 2020 at the Maple Lodge Farms facility

in Brampton."

Although the company has said it is reducing production by a third to facilitate a deep clean of the plant, workers have expressed strong opposition to returning to work until the pandemic is under control. "I'm actually quite scared," said one worker. "I just don't want to go back to work until this is over."

The episode at Maple Lodge Farms' plant underscores the criminal disregard for workers' lives on the part of Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative government. Media reports indicate workers employed in multiple sectors have submitted over 200 COVID-19 related complaints to the Ontario Labour Relations Board. Not a single one has been upheld.

The virus is rampaging through workplaces across the province. At the Conestoga Meats plant in Breslau, 44 workers have tested positive. At the Saputo Dairy Products plant in Vaughan, one worker has died and 23 workers are infected. Three cases have been recorded at Cargill's meatpacking plant in Guelph. At least five personal support worker fatalities have been recorded across Ontario.

Across Canada, at least 1,400 COVID-19 infections have been recorded among meatpackers. At Cargill's High River, Alberta, plant, some 950 cases have been identified. Three fatalities are linked to the outbreak. A Cargill plant south of Montreal, Quebec, was forced to close temporarily after dozens of infections.

Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government has given its stamp of approval to the brutal treatment of meatpacking workers by the food processing giants. A \$77 million package of assistance measures was unveiled earlier this month for the highly-profitable

meat processing businesses, ostensibly to help fund safety measures in their plants.

The fate of meatpacking workers is indicative of the horrific conditions all workers will be faced with as the ruling elite's reckless back-to-work campaign gathers pace. Canada's provincial governments have imposed widespread reopenings across all economic sectors, even as the number of new infections remains high. Auto plants across Ontario are to reopen today, bringing thousands of workers together under conditions that will make the rapid spread of the virus almost inevitable.

The unions are deeply complicit in the back-to-work drive and doing nothing to protect the workers they claim to represent. At Maple Lodge Farms, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union issued tepid appeals for provincial inspectors to work with the company to resolve the safety issues. UFCW Local 175 spokesperson Tim Deelstra also noted pathetically that workers have the right to refuse unsafe work on an individual basis.

What the unions oppose under all circumstances is independent worker action to fight for basic safety measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. At Cargill's Alberta plant, the UFCW opposed strikes or any job action by workers even as the virus raged through the plant, declaring that such action was "not legal." (See: Workers at Cargill's Alberta meatpacking plant forced back to work despite 935 infections .)

The unions have also given their seal of approval to the pro-employer, state-enforced federal and provincial "collective bargaining/labour relations" system ostensibly serving as the mechanism to ensure workers' safety amid the reckless back-to-work drive. With the death toll among workers mounting and news breaking of the mass dismissal of worker complaints by authorities in Ontario, the Canadian Labour Congress declared in a May 8 statement on health and safety that "governments must have the capacity and commitment to enforcing occupational health and safety laws. If we are to avoid a dangerous second wave of COVID-19 infections, governments must also ramp up research and staffing capacity for rapid, effective COVID-19 testing and contact tracing to stem the spread of infections."

Such hollow rhetoric must sound like a cruel joke to poultry workers and meatpackers, who know first-hand

that the unions are opposed to, and systematically seek to sabotage, efforts to mobilize workers' collective strength to ensure that they and their families are protected from the highly-contagious and potentially fatal novel coronavirus.

The only way for meat packers and other sections of the working class to protect their interests and even their lives is to advance their own independent response to the crisis. Rank-and-file committees must be formed independently of the UFCW and the pro-capitalist unions to demand the shutting down of all non-essential production with full pay for workers affected, and the implementation of immediate safety measures, under the supervision of worker representatives and medical experts, in essential workplaces. These must include the supplying of adequate PPE to all workers, the testing of workers regularly to detect cases, the reduction of production line speeds to allow social distancing, the reduction of workers on the job to prevent crowding in the plants, and the provision of full pay to all workers sheltering at home.

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